



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Park of
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FEATURE ARTICLE

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National Park Service Celebrates 95 Years of Preservation and Protection

*Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in,
where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike.*

*This natural beauty-hunger is made manifest . . . in our magnificent National Parks—
Nature's sublime wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world.*

—John Muir

August 25 marks the 95th anniversary since the National Park Service was established in 1916 to preserve and protect special areas set aside for all people to enjoy. The National Park System comprises not only national parks, like the National Park of American Samoa, but also monuments, historic sites, recreation areas, battlefields, lakeshores, and riverways, to name only a few of the over 20 different types of park areas.

Why create national parks? One motive for creating national parks came from the American experience at Niagara Falls at the border between New York State and Canada. The famous falls were America's paramount scenic wonder during the first half of the nineteenth century. However, local landowners had, in their frenzy to maximize profits, gone so far as to erect fences and charge viewers to look through holes at the spectacle. Shoddy concessions and souvenirs, filth, and squalor attended a visit to this most sublime of eastern American features. Clearly government control of such a feature to assure its availability to the public was in order.

During the period from 1919 to 1932, the National Park Service's first director, Stephen Mather, his assistant and successor, Horace Albright, and a cadre of handpicked superintendents consolidated the national park system and defined its operating policies. They concentrated primarily on defining

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The National Park Service cares for special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.

preservation priorities and molding the system according to definite ideas about its purpose. The national parks were for inspiration and education of the people, not, as many supposed, for recreation per se.

The first movement to create a park came amidst the Civil War. Yosemite Valley in California had been first entered by Americans chasing a band of Indians in 1851. Within five years the situation at Niagara Falls began to repeat itself. Claims on the valley lands were filed and tolls charged. Haphazard tourism began even as the fame of the valley spread to a wondering and suspicious East. Concern for this spectacle and its availability to all comers led Congress to withdraw the lands from alienation in 1864 and turn over the valley and a nearby grove of giant sequoias to the state of California as a public park. The state would continue to manage this first federal withdrawal for a park until 1906 when it was merged with Yosemite National Park.

Eight years later Congress established the world's first true national park—Yellowstone in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. Instrumental in its creation was the Northern Pacific Railroad, beginning a 50-year period during which railroads became the most profound influence on the establishment of these reserves and on the development of tourism in them. Where the Yosemite withdrawal consisted of a pair of relatively small areas, Yellowstone was an enormous land of more than 3,400 square miles. The creation of Yellowstone National Park marked the first serious challenge to the culture of land alienation and consumptive use in American history.

The Yellowstone withdrawal was so massive and to many land users apparently purposeless that it was another eighteen years before a second successful park was created. By the end of the century, in addition to Yellowstone, still only five national parks existed—Sequoia, Yosemite, and General Grant in California and Mount Rainier in Washington State. However, Congress was not idle in its preservation efforts and in forming reserves that would later become part of the national park system.

John Muir became concerned about natural areas being damaged and stated:

The great wilds of our country, once held to be boundless and inexhaustible, are being rapidly invaded and overrun in every direction, and everything destructible in them is being destroyed.

How far destruction may go is not easy to guess. Every landscape low and high seems doomed to be trampled and harried.

During the latter portion of the century antiquities of the Southwestern Indians became a source of interest and gain for many Americans. Vandals and pothunters looted Anasazi and other sites, often destroying structures, not to mention the archaeological record, in their greedy haste. The earliest

steps to protect an archaeological site came at Casa Grande Ruin in Arizona, reacting to vandalism of this ancient adobe structure. Part of a Congressional civil appropriations bill in 1889 called for its repair and protection.

A year later, a separate movement led to the establishment of the nation's first national battlefield park. Although some national cemeteries had been established even during the Civil War, no substantial protection had been provided to an entire battlefield. Initially, of course, the South saw no reason to preserve and celebrate its traumatic defeat. However, by the late 1880s, efforts to heal the nation's wounds and commemorate all who fought in the war led to various associations to protect major battlefields. At the behest of one such group Congress set-aside in 1890 the Chickamauga and Chattanooga battlefields.

Finally, in 1906 the early wave of preservation efforts culminated with the Antiquities Act. The outgrowth of continued clamor for protection of archaeological sites, its primary impact gave the president the power to unilaterally declare national monuments on federal lands in order to protect items of historic or scientific interest. The National Park System today includes more than 50 national monuments derived from this legislation.

The establishment of the roots of the national park system was matched by a slower but no less important definition of management policies and priorities. In a consumptive society, these parks were novel and, to many, uncomfortable interruptions of business as usual. Much of the ground-laying of national park policy came from recommendations on the management of Yosemite Valley by eminent landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, creator of New York's Central Park. In his 1865 report to the governor of California, he laid the philosophical foundations of preservation for inspirational purposes and made explicit recommendations on such matters as concession operations, development, scientific protection, and interpretation.

Despite Olmsted's ideas, the pressure to use park resources in traditional consumptive ways was substantial, especially in the huge Yellowstone reserve. Acting to forestall hunting and trapping and further define the degree of protection afforded in a national park, Congress in 1894 passed the Yellowstone Game Protection Act.

By 1912 the parks were well-established and reasonably safe from hunting, logging, and mining. Still, in a rapidly changing nation, uses of and threats to the parks evolved, and answers to new questions had to be found. By the turn of the century, automobiles had appeared in several national parks. However, no definitive policy had been established. Instead, reflecting perhaps the piecemeal management that preceded the 1916 Organic Act, auto use in each park was a separate issue. During 1912, Department of the Interior officials, conservationists, and others met in Yosemite to discuss auto use in the valley. Their comments indicate the prevalent attitudes of the time—that all forms of access to parks should be encouraged; that the primary concern is for the

safety of drivers on the rough and twisting roads; and that no damage either to the park or to the park experience is expected from the admission of automobiles.

In 1916 came the most important document in this entire collection. For some years the parks were run as independent units lost in the bureaucratic maze of the Department of Interior. In a concerted campaign by Robert Sterling Yard, future directors Stephen Mather and Horace Albright, the National Geographic Society, and many others, Congress was encouraged to establish a National Park Service, place all the existing parks under its management, and spell out the purposes for their preservation. The ensuing act, often known as the Organic Act, and its difficult charge to both preserve park resources and make them available to tourists, form the legal foundation stone of the system.

Today there are over 390 national park areas throughout the United States and its territories. The National Park of American Samoa was established in 1988 to preserve the coral reefs, tropical rainforest, archeological and cultural resources, the habitat of fruit bats, and to provide educational opportunities for visitors and residents. National park lands and waters are leased from villages and the American Samoa Government through a long-term agreement with the National Park Service.

Adapted from "America's National Park System: The Critical Documents"